



Dorothea Lange: A Life Beyond Limits

By Linda Gordon

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Winner of the 2010 Bancroft Prize and the 2009 *Los Angeles Times* Book Prize in Biography: Dorothea Lange's photographs define how we remember the Depression generation; now an evocative biography defines her creative struggles and enduring legacy.

We all know Dorothea Lange's iconic photos—the "Migrant Mother" holding her child, the gaunt men forlornly waiting in breadlines—but few know the arc of her extraordinary life. In this sweeping account, renowned historian Linda Gordon charts Lange's journey from polio-ridden child to wife and mother, to San Francisco portrait photographer, to chronicler of the Great Depression and World War II. Gordon uses Lange's life to anchor a moving social history of twentieth-century America, re-creating the bohemian world of San Francisco, the Dust Bowl, and the Japanese American internment camps. She explores Lange's growing radicalization as she embraced the democratic power of the camera, and she examines Lange's entire body of work, reproducing more than one hundred images, many of them previously unseen and some of them formerly suppressed. Lange reminds us that beauty can be found in unlikely places, and that to respond to injustice, we must first simply learn how to see it. 128 photos

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Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

[Signature]Reviewed by Kirstin DowneyHistorian Linda Gordon presents us with a portrait of the artist as a woman in her fascinating new biography of photographer Dorothea Lange [1895–1965], who captured the images of Americans on the move during the Great Depression. Lange's most famous picture features a migrant woman in California, a refugee from the Dust Bowl. She sits by the side of the road in her lean-to tent, her children draped on her body, hanging from her haggard frame like dead weights, as she stoically looks out into the distance. But the book's central focus is the journey made by the woman standing behind the camera lens. Lange was raised on New York City's Lower East Side and overcame obstacles almost from the start. During her childhood, her parents separated, which Dorothea experienced as a desertion by her father, and a bout of childhood polio left her with a permanent limp. She spotted an opportunity, however, in photography, which was a burgeoning new art field. Dorothea apprenticed herself to a master to learn the craft, giving herself a new identity. She dropped her childhood name, Dorothea Nutzhorn, and adopted her mother's maiden name instead. She further redefined herself after making a westward trek in 1918. Within two years, she emerged as a prosperous society photographer in San Francisco who specialized in portraiture of the city's elite, but that work dried up in the 1930s. Lange shifted course again, becoming a documentary photographer for New Deal programs. From 1935 to 1941, Lange was virtually a migrant worker herself, traveling from place to place, photographing farm workers in fields and primitive labor camps. Gordon wrestles with the issue of how Lange dealt with her role as a woman in a society where family burdens are disproportionately borne by females. Raising a large brood of children and stepchildren, Lange frequently had to put her own work aside to run the household. She also became the primary breadwinner for her first husband, cowboy artist Maynard Dixon, and later supported the career of her second husband, economist and diplomat Paul Taylor, despite her own failing health. Lange privately railed at her family obligations. She shipped the children away when their care conflicted with her schedule or that of her respective husbands. And sometimes she could be cruel: she took revenge on her adolescent stepdaughter, whose father dumped her in Dorothea's lap for months at a time, criticizing and carping at her and photographing her in ways that an adolescent girl would likely have found humiliating. Dorothea Lange's talented eye brings the Great Depression home for us even today, but an observer might suggest that Dorothea, despite her fame and talent, was as much a captive of a woman's societal roles as the migrant mother she so brilliantly photographed. (Oct.) *Kirstin Downey is a former staff writer at the Washington Post and author of The Woman Behind the New Deal: The Life of Frances Perkins, FDR's Secretary of Labor and His Moral Conscience (Doubleday/Talese).*

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Review

“[A] masterly biography that illustrates the personal and professional struggles and achievements of a woman who was ahead of her time and who remains overshadowed by her work.”

- *Elle*

“An astonishing and deeply moving biography of Dorothea Lange, America’s foremost social photographer. No other account can rival this one for its engagement or for its dissection of the passions, injuries, and hopes that impelled Lange to challenge the boundaries of gender, race, and family. Linda Gordon writes about her complex subject with sophistication, frankness, and sensitivity. In the process, Gordon demonstrates yet again that she is among the most gifted and probing historians of our time.”

- **Gary Gerstle, author of *American Crucible: Race and Nation in the Twentieth Century***

“As Dorothea Lange’s biographer, Linda Gordon is fortunate that Lange’s private life was as complex?exceptional yet archetypal?as the history she documented in her photographs. The resulting book is superb social history rendered through a remarkable artist and personality.”

- **Diane McWhorter, author of the Pulitzer Prize-winning *Carry Me Home***

“Linda Gordon, one of our greatest historians, gives us an engrossing portrait of Dorothea Lange. Every page of this magisterial biography sparkles with insight into Lange’s life, passions, photographic techniques and achievements?and into the lives of the dispossessed farmers, unemployed laborers, and incarcerated Japanese-Americans who were her greatest subjects.”

- **George Chauncey, author of *Gay New York***

About the Author

Linda Gordon, winner of two Bancroft Prizes and the Los Angeles Times Book Prize, is the author of *The Second Coming of the KKK*, *Dorothea Lange and Impounded*, and the coauthor of *Feminism Unfinished*. She is the Florence Kelley Professor of History at New York University and lives in New York and Madison, Wisconsin.

Users Review

From reader reviews:

Robert Franco:

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Milton Hill:

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